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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the self-evaluation maintenance model (SEM) which suggests that much social behavior can be understood by assuming that persons are motivated to maintain a positive self-evaluation. The two processes by which one's social circumstances may affect self-evaluation, i.e., reflection and comparison, are described. The relationship between self-evaluation and self-esteem is explored. Studies in which self-esteem was measured are reviewed, and results are discussed in terms of the SEM model. A hypothesis which explains the weak relationship between measured self-esteem and the SEM model is suggested. (JAC)

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Self-Evaluation Maintenance Processes and Individual Differences in Self-Esteem*

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Self-Evaluation Maintenance Processes and Individual Differences in Self-Esteem

Abraham Tesser and Jennifer Campbell

For the past few years we have been studying social behavior within the framework of something we call a self-evaluation maintenance model. The model suggests that much social behavior can be understood by assuming that persons are motivated to maintain a positive self-evaluation. The model identifies two processes by which one's social circumstances affect self-evaluation: A reflection process and a comparison process.

All of us at one time or another seem to take pride in the accomplishments of others. We may tell someone about how well our sister plays the piano or that the famous lawyer on television is our neighbor. These are examples of the reflection process. In order to bask in the reflected glory of another, two things are necessary: the other's performance must be good and there must be some bond to the other (i.e., closeness). That is, there is little to be gained in the way of reflection from someone whose performance is mediocre regardless of how close one is to that other; and there is little to be gained from another with whom one can claim no association regardless of how good that other performs.

In order to raise self-evaluation through reflection one should be close to good performing others. However, being close to an outstanding other can also lower self-evaluation--by comparison. The comparison process depends on the same two variables as the reflection process: the other's closeness and performance. One will not suffer by comparison to a mediocre performing other

(regardless of closeness) and one is less likely to compare oneself to a distant other (regardless of performance).

The reflection and comparison processes appear contradictory: They suggest that a close relationship with a good performing other will raise self-evaluation (via the reflection process) or lower self-evaluation (via the comparison process). However, these two processes are not always equal in importance. They are weighted by the relevance of the performance dimension to the actor's own self-definition. We assume that people recognize and positively value achievement in a large variety of areas. However, any particular individual personally aspires to excellence in only a limited number of areas. To the extent that another's performance is in one of the areas which are relevant to the actor's self-definition the comparison process will be more important than the reflection process. If the other's performance is in an area which is not relevant to the actor's self-definition the reflection process will be more important than the comparison process.

In our empirical work we have focused on relevance, performance, and closeness. That is, when will an individual regard an activity as more or less important (relevant) to his self-definition; when will an individual attempt to facilitate the performance of another and when will he attempt to interfere with that performance; when will he increase closeness to another and when will he decrease closeness to another. The model assumes that individuals will affect changes in these variables in a direction that will maximize self-evaluation. Although each of these variables can and has been operationally defined in experimental and field tests of the model, we have not attempted to operationalize or empirically study "self-evaluation," the theoretical mediator of the relationships among closeness, performance and

relevance. Why?

Self-Evaluation and Self-Esteem

Within the model self-evaluation is treated as a hypothetical construct, a theoretical fiction which is used to organize and make comprehensible the relationships among the variables that have empirical indicants (i.e., relevance, performance, closeness). Similarly, self-evaluation maintenance is viewed as a hypothetical process much like "dissonance reduction" is viewed as a hypothetical process in dissonance theory. Neither dissonance reduction nor self-evaluation maintenance is directly measured or observed, but both models are testable because they make specific predictions concerning the observable antecedents and observable consequences of the hypothesized processes.

Self-evaluation is related to self-esteem, a construct for which there is a rich measurement tradition (Wylie, 1979). As such, it might seem reasonable to use a measure of self-esteem to operationalize the self-evaluation construct. While self-esteem measures have been productively used in a variety of contexts, we question their utility for present purposes.

Most measures of self-esteem are chronic individual-difference measures. The SEM model as presently articulated is not an individual-difference model. Self-evaluation as construed here is subject to momentary fluctuations with changing circumstances. This does not mean we believe chronic individual differences in self-esteem do not exist. Although the model assumes that persons are motivated to maintain a positive self-evaluation, this assumption certainly does <u>not</u> imply that there are no persons with chronically low levels of self-esteem. We believe that there are chronic differences in self-esteem and that such differences are often consequential for behavior. Indeed, much

of this symposium deals with such differences. However, chronic self-esteem and self-evaluation are not the same thing. Self-esteem is a general "entity" independent of any specific theory whereas self-evaluation is more specifically defined in terms of the SEM model. It is a constantly changing component in a specific, dynamic, process.

Chronic Self-Esteem and Engagement in SEM processes

While we believe that most persons are motivated to maintain a positive self-evaluation (a position consistent with the work of McFarlin & Blascovich, reported here), chronic self-esteem may still be associated with the SEM process. For example, persons who are particularly adept at structuring their environment so as to maintain a positive self-evaluation may have a chronically higher level of self-esteem than persons who are less adept. Thus, one might predict that chronic self-esteem ought to be positively related to the use of SEM strategies. Indeed, there is evidence that persons high in chronic self-esteem tend to behave more self-defensively than persons low in chronic self-esteem (this is an hypothesis advanced by Alloy in this symposium). On the other hand, persons low in chronic self-esteem may feel more "threatened" when their self-evaluation is at stake than persons chronically high in self-esteem. Thus, chronic self-esteem may be negatively associated with the use of SEM strategies (Wills, 1981).

Although, it is possible to relate chronic self-esteem to the use of SEM strategies, its presumed relationship to the use of these strategies is not unambiguous. We have used measures of chronic self-esteem in several SEM studies. While self-esteem does not bear a strong relationship to the behavior predicted by the SEM model, its relationships is (with one exception)

consistent: Persons low in self-esteem tend to engage in such behaviors more than persons high in self-esteem. These studies are summarized in Table 1.

/Insert Table 1 about here/

Studies In Which Self-Esteem was Measured

In one study (Tesser & Campbell, 1980a) we examined the effects of another person's closeness and performance on self-definition (relevance). Each female subject interacted with another person who was described as similar (close) or dissimilar (distant) to her. In the course of the experiment the other performed the same as the subject on one task and better on another task. As predicted by the model, the other's closeness and performance interacted in affecting the relevance of each task to the subject's self-definition: The task on which the other performed better was less relevant to the subject than the task on which they performed equally well; this relationship was more pronounced when the other was close than when the other was distant. When we divided the subjects on the basis of their scores on Rosenberg's (1965) self-esteem scale, we found that those low in self-esteem showed the predicted pattern more clearly than those high in self-esteem, but the difference was not statistically significant. Recently, a conceptually similar study using male subjects and a different set of taks was completed by Tesser and Paulhus (in press). The overall pattern of results was replicated. Further, the pattern was more pronounced for low self-esteem persons than for high self-esteem persons. Again, however, the self-esteem effect was not significant.

Another study (Tesser & Campbell, in press) focused on the circumstances under which another's performance will be viewed in favorable or unfavorable

terms. The model leads us to expect that the closeness of the other and the relevance of the task being performed should combine interactively to affect the perception of the other's performance. In this study, subjects were given the opportunity to perform on two tasks that differed in their personal relevance to the subject. After receiving feedback on each trial of each task, they were asked to indicate how another person would perform on that task: The other was either a friend they had brought with them (close other) or a stranger they had just met (distant other). As predicted, subjects were more positive about the performance of their friend than the stranger on the irrelevant task, but more positive about the stranger than their friend on the relevant task. When subjects were divided according to their level of self-esteem, again we found that the predictions associated with the SEM model were more strongly confirmed among low self-esteem subjects than among high self-esteem subjects. Again, however, the self-esteem effect was not significant.

Why is it that the associations between self-esteem and SEM behaviors are so weak? We have suggested earlier that a plausable case can be made for both a positive association (engaging in SEM behaviors leads to high self-esteem) and a negative association (low esteem increases the need to engage in SEM behaviors). Perhaps both of these are operating to some extent and cancelling one another out. A recent field study, however, raises another, perhaps more interesting, possibility.

In collaboration with Monte Smith (Tesser, Campbell, & Smith, in preparation), we asked fifth and sixth graders who had responded to the Piers-Harris Self-Concept scale (Piers, 1969) to rate their own performance and the performance of a close classmate on activities which were high or low

in personal relevance. Their teachers made the same set of ratings. For present purposes we focus only on the teachers' ratings and the difference between the teacher ratings and the student ratings—what we call "distortion". In both cases, the model anticipates an interaction such that the student is relatively better on the relevant activity and the close other is relatively better on the irrelevant activity.

This predicted two-factor interaction did not reach significance for the "objective" teacher ratings, but there was a significant three-factory interaction with self-esteem. The effect predicted by the SEM model was more pronounced for low self-esteem pupils than for high self-esteem pupils. With "distortion" as the dependent variable, the predicted two-factor interaction was significant and there was also a significant self-esteem effect. However, in contrast to the other studies and the teacher ratings, pupils <u>high</u> in self-esteem showed greater distortion in the direction predicted by the SEM model than pupils low in self-esteem.

Our time is running short so we will close with a very speculative hypothesis. Although we assume that both high and low self-esteem persons try to maintain a positive evaluation, we suggest that their strategies for accomplishing this goal may differ. Suppose social behavior is divided into two classes: cognitive/perceptual behavior and "behavioral" behavior. Then perhaps, as Alloy suggests, persons high in self-esteem are more prone to <u>perceive</u> the world in a self-serving way; that is, high self-esteem persons maintain a positive evaluation primarily through cognitive/perceptual behavior. As noted above, in the Tesser, Campbell, and Smith study high self-esteem subjects tended to distort performance differentials more than low. On the other hand, McFarlin and Blascovich have shown that low

self-esteem persons are more likely to change their behavior when given negative feedback. Perhaps, then, low self-esteem persons perceived reality more accurately than high self-esteem persons, but tend to rely on behavioral strategies to maintain self-evaluation. In the Tesser, Campbell and Smith study low self-esteem subjects were, according to "objective" ratings, more likely to actually be in "actual" circumstances that were conducive to maximizing self-evaluation.

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TABLE 1

SOME STUDIES IN WHICH SELF-ESTEEM HAS BEEN MEASURED

Study	"Independent Variables"	"Dependent Variable"	Effect of Self-Esteem
Tesser & Campbell (1980)	Performance, Closeness	Relevance (self-definition)	Lo S-E > Hi S-E (n.s.)
Tesser & Paulhus (in press)	Performance, Closeness	Relevance (self-definition)	Lo S-E > Hi S-E (n.s.)
Tesser & Campbell (in press)	Closeness, Relevance	Performance Ratings	Lo S-E > Hi S-E (n.s.)
Tesser, Campbell & Smith (in preparation)	Self vs. Close Other, Relevance	"Objective" Performance Ratings	Lo S-E > Hi S-E (sig.)
Tesser, Campbell & Smith (in preparation)	Self vs. Close Other, Relevance	"Distortion" in Performance Ratings	Hi S-E > Lo S-E (sig.)